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From Housewives to Homemakers: Civic Engagement, Imagination, and Déjà Vu in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT In a democratic country like Taiwan, civic participation generally takes place everywhere and every day in various forms, such as petitioning, community building, and protesting, and it is too mundane to be noted. Not until the moment of crisis could the energy it has harbored be seen. COVID-19 undoubtedly is a challenge for all humans in the world. Misfortune as it was, this state of exception presented people with resilience and creativity to assist one another. Starting from an incident of "veg boxes" during the pandemic, this article tries to connect the optimistic view toward social changes with its possible model. By linking Homemakers United Foundation, a local organization closely related to food and environmental issues, and its development to the history of nation-building, this article also discusses what kind of civic imagination has been deployed and its connection with history.

KEYWORDS Cold War, Taiwan, civic imagination, housewife, social movements

When the first wave of COVID-19 finally hit Taiwan in May 2021, going to markets to buy one's food became an action triggering public anxiety. With confirmed cases rising, all forms of markets were stigmatized, and those insisting on going to markets, usually the elder or family caretakers, were regarded as infection control breaches. To stop those "ignorant old people" from risking their lives buying food, "veg boxes" went viral overnight. Orders flocked to any platforms with this service. Buying one's vegetables online became a trendy gesture of responsible citizens engaged in preventing the virus from spreading. These little

boxes carried people's optimistic imagination that everyone could contribute to modeling a better future even when facing this tough and unknown challenge. G0v, a grassroots civic community that was actively involved in the Sunflower Student Movement, also accelerated the visibility of this veg box issue by starting a collaborative writing page targeting the information related to buying veg boxes and even providing a collection of recipes to teach kitchen novices how to cook.

This series of smooth organization—from searching for the source of veg boxes to publicizing the information with the cowriting page to teaching each other how to deal with the ingredients they get from random boxes—did not come out of thin air. Instead, it greatly benefited from the history of how people have been organized and are organizing themselves in Taiwan. The history constructed a paradigm imprinted on people's minds and further influenced how people imagined their roles regarding civic participation. Twenty years ago, the Homemakers Union Consumers Coop figured out a way called "a basket of vegetables," i.e., a veg box, to combine their support to the practitioners of eco-friendly agriculture with the hope for every member to enjoy vegetables with less nitrate. They started to work with farmers, to study more effective ways of cultivating organic food, and to build a channel to share the idea of ethical eating and creative recipes with their members. Tracing the symbol of veg boxes, this short piece for Feeding the Civic Imagination Forum revisits the history of this thread that features the role of housewives and their imagination to offer a different story of civic participation in Taiwan.

Homemakers United Foundation and Taiwanese Housewives

Before the lifting of martial law, New Environment Magazine, an environmental organization formed primarily by university professors and scholars, was established in 1985 as a response to the burgeoning environmental challenges,

emerging as a trailblazer in the environmental movement in Taiwan. Hsu Shen-shu, the wife of a founding member of New Environment Magazine, played a central role in managing the group's administrative tasks. From a housewife's perspective, Hsu required more practical action than writing articles to change this worsening world, so she gathered volunteers who were also middle-class housewives to start the New Environment Homemakers League (Sin Huanjing Jhufu Lianmeng). Through her imagination, Hsu's move made the wives, who were usually excluded from the public sphere in those days, potential participants in social movements.[1] Moreover, to differentiate this league from another mainstream feminist activist group at the time, whose members mainly were female scholars and elites urging women to "leave the kitchen and march to the Office of the President,"[2] Hsu and her fellows chose to "stay in the kitchen," for the kitchen was the core of their life and identity. Identifying themselves as "ordinary mothers," these women hoped to make room for more women like themselves to participate in social issues from everyday practice and living habits. For example, their debut, also one of the most well-known actions, targeted food —a group of women dressed up and stood in front of McDonald's to protest against the overpriced hamburgers and the harm of junk food in 1986, when the chain just had its first branch in Taiwan. In 1989, the New Environment Homemakers League was registered under the Homemakers United Foundation (HUF thereafter). An organization under the name of housewives was then born.[3]

At the early stage, HUF, according to its claim, took care of issues mothers would typically be concerned about— environment, education, female empowerment, and green consumption.[4] It was generally agreed that HUF did an extraordinary job when it came to issues related to environmental protection, via which they worked actively with both governmental and non-government sectors.[5] HUF's interest in green topics later fostered a co-buying group—Homemakers Union Consumers Co-op (HUCC). HUCC, which focuses on food—the most common symbol of everyday mundanity—to bridge individuals and society, is a cooperative chiefly promoting healthy eating, environmentally friendly consumption, and the

cooperative economy. Now, it has eighty thousand members all around Taiwan, which means at least the same number of households complete their food consumption through the network built by the coop because its target audience connects their social identity with family, such as mothers and caretakers. Most Taiwanese cannot tell the difference between HUF and HUCC or detail what they are doing, but the title “Homemaker Union” will naturally evoke their engagement in environmental issues.

The connection between HUF and HUCC, as described by Hsiu-chuan Cheng, the current chairperson of HUF, can be likened to that of a mother and her child, with each entity sharing and dividing labor: the former advocates environmental policies, and the latter works on food-related issues and financially supports the former.[6] Their relationship suggests a linear logic of the potential of citizenship based on food. HUCC can be said to be the kitchen of HUF. As Cheng said, HUCC’s members change the world through everyday practice. Kitchens, a seemingly pure domestic space that women can fully control, are turned into a public sphere when the controllers problematize food and eating issues. By training and grouping women capable of “voting with their forks,”[7] from their food preparation to consumption, this kitchen, where one thinks about how to feed a family, can help to turn housewives into “qualified citizens”[8] who can participate in changing the food system to make human life more sustainable and who can further educate their families to be as qualified as their mothers.

Housewifized Citizenship[9]

This seemingly perfect citizen cultivation plan of HUCC is very similar to the content behind the zeitgeist pervading in the 1950s, the Cold War era. “Educating a mother is equal to educating a family” was a slogan to promote *the Plan to Help the Needy in Taiwan*, a governmental project to eliminate poverty in a society undergoing economic reconstruction after Japanese colonial rule.[10] According to

the agreement of the China Aid Act of 1948, the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction invited home economics experts from the US to teach mothers to support a family more scientifically so as not to fall into the poverty circle and give the communist party chances to win the village people in the Cold War context.[11] This part of US aid brought the idea of management into families, popularizing flour consumption and partly changing people's eating habits through women.[12] Women at the time not only kept the kitchens but also were the gatekeepers of a newly established sovereignty by utilizing the limited resources they could gain. From saving the country with the family in the 1950s to governing the country with family education, women had always been situated at the post to connect the country and the family, making the two a continuum.[13] Female homemakers had never been absent from the process of nation-building; they were active "in-house" participants even before the term civic participation emerged. However, when this relatively established country walked on its path to a modern and democratic nation-state, ordinary women became "unqualified" citizens who did not participate in the public sphere because the idea of family was overturned, being simplified as the kitchen that women needed to leave. If women refused to leave the kitchens, they would become isolated housewives and end up as miserable decorations of a happy family.[14]

HUF's appearance overturned the dichotomy between the private and public spheres by envisioning a different kind of housewife who can make up for the deficiency of the "big nation" (da jia) through the daily life practice in one's own "small family" (xiao jia). HUF attempted to prove that if women could take care of their homes, they could take care of the state.[15] Throughout these years, HUF has made marvelous progress in advocating green topics, including the scheme of sorting recyclable materials and collecting food waste, which hugely influences the mode of life in Taiwan.[16] HUF's strategy of making housewives homemakers and further "life makers" (shenghuo zhe) succeeds in bringing another possible form of civic participation into Taiwanese society. More and more women proudly emphasize their identity as mothers while participating in scaled-up negotiations

and meetings with government units at various levels and collaborating with international organizations. These mothers are more than ordinary housewives; they are as resourceful and influential as those feminist elites aiming at the office of the president.

Undoubtedly, HUF's success has positioned it as a model of civic and, subsequently, political engagement, providing people with a fresh perspective on envisioning or redefining their involvement in reshaping society. With HUF's case, I intend to show how the power of civic imagination can upend the image of the kitchen deployed by the HUF's counterpart in the mainstream feminist movement. Regarding strategy, food as an advocacy target effectively arouses people's attention, making the everyday political. Besides the accessibility, food's translatability makes it a seemingly handy tool to deal with the problems people face in life.[17] Some ordinary women could translate food into a way to live as a housewife while granting themselves political agency. However, because of food's relationship to human consumption, people must be more creative or food will be appropriated by capitalism. As Seungsook Moon reminded through her study on a feminist food cooperative in South Korea, if the people's motivation for joining a coop is out of personal interests, such as the pursuit of families' health or safe food,[18] the underpinning ideals of changing the food system or creating a clean and poison-free environment would be concealed by this sort of consumer movement.[19] When consumption goes first, the focus of the whole movement would gradually move to marketing and branding rather than advocating sustainable diets or lifestyles to draw people's attention to the food system, the origin of food crisis nowadays.[20] This way, the complexity of the homemaker-producer relationship, the reasons for active participants to be engaged in ethical food, and even the possible exploitation will be neglected.

At the core of HUF's origins, the image of middle-class housewives has consistently been a subject of criticism, especially after the popularization of HUCC, whose food and ingredients are relatively higher in price.[21] Hence, these

“housewives” successfully demonstrate a daring way to imagine what a housewife can do by trying to break a traditionally acknowledged public-private dichotomy where food belongs to the privatized sphere of personal choice and commercial activities, and people with political agency reside only outside the kitchen. Whether direct or indirect, HUF’s appearance has created some impact, especially on how to unite people with similar beliefs and carry out civic engagement.

From the example of food as an agent of civic imagination in Taiwan, the slogan “educating a mother is equal to educating a family” could still be heard faintly. The veg box in its past and present life embodies the historical materiality of this kind of imagination, whose agency comes from different historical contexts, inter-referencing one another. Detached from or overlapped with the original meanings, the civic imagination endorsed with new importance by the contemporaries in response to certain urgency will start another phase of civic participation or even for entirely novel possibilities to take root.

Notes

1. Yu-ci Chen , “Rensheng Jingsiang: Sheng jhih yong–Fangtan Faci Ren Hsu Shen Shu Wang Bao Zi — ” {Reflection of Life: Cocoon of life–Interviewing the pioneers, Hsu Shen-shu and Wang Bao Zi}, last modified March 1, 2012, https://www.huf.org.tw/essay/content/768. ↩

2. When addressing the practice of gender equality, the Awakening Foundation once titled the forum “Taiwanese women leave the kitchens for the Office of the President” (Taiwan Nyuren Zouchu Chufang, Maisiang Zongtongfu). They claimed that women should be emancipated from the kitchen to concern themselves with and participate in changing society. They were strongly against the female workforce going underground, being privatized in the name of mothers and caretakers, who according to them led such an isolated life that they were stopped from having a full citizenship, for they could not even participate in the most basic form of civic participation, i.e., election. Yu-hsiu, Liu et al., *Nyusing Guojia Jhaogugongzuo • • (Females, States, the Care Work)* (Taipei: Fembooks Publishing House, 1986). ↩

3. Though the English title of HUF uses “homemakers,” the Mandarin title *Jhufu* is close to “housewives” or “the mistress of a family.” In their own writings, they often identify

themselves with the role of mothers, so *jhufu* would be more frequently associated with "housewives" than "homemakers." ↩

4. In Chen Lei-Ti's analysis of almost thirty years of publications HUF has sent to their members, the concern of HUF can be generally divided into these four fields, among which the ratio of environment and consumption issues was about 55 percent of their primary work. Lei-Ti Chen , "Cong Nyu Li Dao Lyu Li: Jhufu Lianmeng De Huanbao Guanhuai (1987–2015)" 1987–2015 (From 'Female Power' to 'Green Power': Homemaker United Foundation's Environmental Concerns, 1987–2015), " (master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, 2016). ↩

5. Wan-li Ho, *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2016). ↩

6. Wan-chun Chen, host, "EP41 - Zhufu Lianmeng Hao Zimei-Jijinhui Yu Hezuoshe" (HUF Sisters-the Foundation and the Cooperative), in *Yi Lan Cai Zhenxinhua* (A Basket of Vegetables and Sincere Words), podcast, January 17, 2022, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0VrgOcuubSCYsmi0Mn7tCt. ↩

7. Here, I refer to Michael Pollan's phrase "Vote with Your Fork," by which Pollan claims consumers can influence the food system through their choice of food. ↩

8. See Note < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/from-housewives-to-homemakers-civic-engagement-imagination-taiwan-chi/#fn-13256-2> 2. ↩

9. The term "housewifized" connects this article to Maria Mies's influential concept of "housewifization." In her book, Mies examines how women's roles have historically shifted, showing how women and nature became exploited resources to serve capitalist development and capital accumulation. Women were relegated from the "public" sphere to the "private" one, excluded from formal sector jobs. Their labor became classified as informal and invisible. Even housewives became dehumanized—ideologically stripped of their role and status as citizens. By using "housewifized," this article taps into Mies's framework which critically analyzes the marginalization of women and the value of their labor over time to emphasize the dynamic process behind the term "housewife" instead of a fixed result. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986). ↩

10. Ping-Chun Hsiung, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 49. ↩

11. Chin-Wen Chen , "Taiwan Nongye Tuiguang Jiaoyu Jianshi "(A Brief History of Agricultural Extension in Taiwan), *Nongye Tuiguang Wenhui* (Agricultural Extension Anthology) 39 (1994): 5–9. ↩

12. Sheng-Fen Lin . "Taiwan Mianshi De Yangcheng: Meiyuanshidai shuru mianfen ye gaibian pengren wen hua " (The Consumption of Wheat Food in Taiwan: Flour Imported at US Aid Age Also Changing

Culinary Culture), last modified April 2, 2022, https://www.agriharvest.tw/archives/78088 < https://www.agriharvest.tw/archives/78088> .

13. Chi's thesis explains how home economics was instituted and occupied an essential position in the education system to instruct the construction of modern families after the war. Yushiuan Chi, "Studies of Domestic Labour and Family in the Making of Taiwan from 1996 to 2006" (master's thesis, National Central University, 2017).

14. See the above mentioned narrative of the feminist movement in the 1980s, which was largely influenced by second-wave feminism in the West.

15. Shu-Ning Lin , "Zhufu Lianmeng Huanjing Baohu Jijinhui Zhuyao Canyuzhe Zhi Zhongyao Shengming Jingyan Yanjiu Yi Taizhong Fen Shiwusuo Wei Li " (The Research of Major Participant's Significant Life Experiences, Taichung Branch, Homemakers' Union and Foundation) (master's thesis, National Taichung University of Education, 2013), 144.

16. Man-Li Chen , "Taiwan Chuyu Huishou Zhengce De Tuishou " (The Facilitators of the Policies of Recollecting Food Waste), December 10, 2015, https://www.hucc-coop.tw/monthly/PUBCATMONTHLY333/6158 < https://www.hucc-coop.tw/monthly/PUBCATMONTHLY333/6158> .

17. In the case studied by Giang Nguyen-Thu, she problematizes the process of food whose symbol was turned from hope to danger and indicates that the concept of "dirty food" and people's reactions to it reflect some larger issues beyond food consumption, such as the stuckness of mothers in Vietnam. Giang Nguyen-Thu, "Hectic Slowness: Digital Temporalities of Precarious Care from a Global South Perspective," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 8 (May 4, 2021): 1936–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1921825 < https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1921825> .

18. Similar reasons are often seen in the narratives of some participants of HUF, who support their coop because of food safety scandals or their sick families.

19. Seungsook Moon, "Women's Food Work, Food Citizenship, & Transnational Consumer Capitalism: A Case Study of a Feminist Food Cooperative in South Korea," *Food, Culture & Society* (March 26, 2021):1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1892255 < https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1892255> .

20. Continuing the context of Japanese alternative food movements, HUCC borrows the term "life makers" (Shenghuo zhe) to encourage its members to be more conscious of every aspect of life and the changes they can bring to this world. However, on the website of HUCC, the only section related to life makers is "Shenghuo Jhe Jhoubao," a weekly feature promoting seasonal food and environmentally friendly products. Moreover, in recent years, there have always been rumors about the mismanagement of the cooperative. In 2018, a general manager without experience in participating in

the cooperative was appointed to HUCC for her professional background in marketing and management. Later in 2020, the chlorinated chicken scandal caused a trust issue between the cooperative members and its management, which shook the center of this interpersonal network—trust. ↩

21. Jun-ren Li , "Mama Chuji—Sin Huanjing Jhufu Lianmeng " (Moms on the Move—the New Environment Homemakers League), *Xingyuan* (Doctor's Apricot Orchard) 35 (June 1987). ↩

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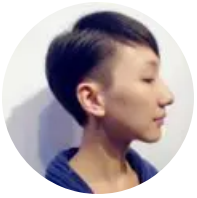

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